

# Inside the Psychologist's Studio: Gordon Bower

February 27, 2011

National Medal of Science winner Gordon Bower sat down with APS President Walter Mischel for the annual “Inside the Psychologist’s Studio” event at the APS 21st Annual Convention. The two long-time friends and colleagues discussed Bower’s ascent as one of the world’s most influential psychologists.

Bower was born in a small town named Bowerston, OH, where, he noted, “three-fourths of the people were named Bower; one-quarter were named Gordon.” At a young age, Bower felt driven to succeed, a motivation he now attributes to his father. Bower’s father had sacrificed a career as an international traveling businessman to return home to take care of his ailing parents and the family business. He was then faced with the daunting task of raising his growing family in the aftermath of the Depression. As Bower looked back on his accomplishments, he explained that during much of his career he was trying to “fulfill the dreams my father was forced to abandon as he sacrificed for our family.”

In high school, Bower demonstrated a strong work ethic, wide-ranging interests, and a brilliance that was apparent not only in his school work, but on the baseball field in which he became a star with a major league professional future. Mischel asked Bower to describe his first foray into psychology. Bower worked with patients with extreme psychotic illnesses at the Cleveland State Medical Hospital, what he called “the end of the line” for many of them. Seeing the ineffectiveness of the available psychotherapies for such patients, Bower soon changed his focus to basic research in psychology. He turned down several offers to play professional baseball and instead attended Case Western Reserve University on a baseball scholarship.

At Case Western, Bower studied with Charles Porter who turned him onto quantitative learning theory. He continued his studies at Yale under the mentorship of Neil Miller, a “mind blowing” experience, according to Bower, who was captivated by Miller’s “dedication and commitment to truth in science.” At Yale, Bower studied reward circuitry in rats, writing his first published paper on the subject.

One summer during graduate school, Bower attended a workshop on mathematical psychology at Stanford. It was at this workshop that Bower met Pat Suppes, who had set up a math and social science program at Stanford. After completing his graduate studies at Yale, Bower was hired to work in the department at Stanford where he remained for the rest of his career, becoming one of its greatest stars and leaders.

Gordon Bower

At Stanford, where he currently is the A.R. Lang Professor of Psychology, Emeritus, Bower and his many students did pioneering research for half a century that transformed diverse areas of psychology, including animal learning, mathematical models, memory organization, and human associative memory. His monumental contributions were remarkably wide-ranging, for example delving into the links between emotion and cognition, including the discovery of mood-congruent recall. In a career dazzling

in its range and depth, Bower also trained multiple generations of students who became leading figures in psychological science, continuing to shape much of its current agenda. His extensive professional contributions include serving as an early APS president, as well as having diverse major policy consulting and advisory roles with NIH. His theoretical and empirical contributions have been recognized with all the highest honors and rewards of our science, including very early election to the National Academy of Science, and perhaps most important to him, the respect, affection, and devotion of his students and colleagues.

Toward the end of the interview, Mischel invited Bower to share with the researchers in the room some insight into how he managed to transcend the traditional sub-disciplinary boundaries in science and to change core ideas and research trends in so many different areas of psychology. Throughout his career, Bower thought of his research ideas by drawing analogies between an important finding in one area and applying that to the existing knowledge and findings in another area. He told the audience to “work very, very hard, harder than the biggest workaholic you know, be loyal to your friends, and read the experimental literature and always push yourself to go beyond what you see there, rather than just criticize.” He also encouraged researchers to think of themselves as a member of a collegial society in which knowing all of the people around you is important, particularly those who are in your area.

To say Bower is passionate about academics is a pale understatement. His scholarship and interests have no boundaries. Although he is retired, Bower “wanders around” Stanford University attending classes from Comparative Literature to Art and Architecture of the Renaissance to the History of Modern Europe. “I don’t take the tests of course,” he joked. Retirement also gives him more time to spend with his wife of 52 years, Sharon; his three children; and five grandchildren. He remains a remarkably modest intellectual giant, who characteristically understated the magnitude of his own achievements in front of a packed audience that was clearly awed by them and by him.

See more interviews with legends of psychological science [here](#).